

LFA Building Sounds Podcast: London Festival of Architecture 2023

Programme, with Melodie Leung (Zaha Hadid Architects) and Gonzalo Herrero Delicado (Ecocity World Summit) - Transcript.

ELIZA: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind the people, places and projects in our city, brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I'm your host, Eliza Grosvenor.

Last episode, we explored how we can create sustainable futures, looking at two projects in the Royal Docks. For this conversation, we're mixing it up a little bit and we are not exploring a specific project or idea... we're exploring a whole festival! The London Festival of Architecture program for 2023 has now been launched ahead of the month-long series of events, happening across London across the whole of June.

I'm joined by one of our 2023 Curation Panel members, Melodie and Eco City World Summit Director Gonzalo. To start with, could you both introduce yourself and your relation to the LFA?

MELODIE: My name is Melodie and I'm an Associate Director at Zaha Architects. I've been working there for over 18 years leading on design, working on projects that range from architecture to interiors, to products, installations, and master plans.

London Festival of Architecture actually has a really special place for me because I was involved already from 2017. I remember it was before Rosa was the director and it happened quite organically. I organised a conference which was foregrounding women in the industry and really letting them lead the conversations and focusing on topics.

The first one was about unbuilt contributions to the built environment. And we got a lot of feedback on the atmosphere and the way that the conversation was very open and discovery led was quite special. So it was through all of the encouragement from the LFA team and the participants that we then started to organise this pretty much every year since then.

And then last year we also gave a tour of the Aquatics centre. So I think I have these really special, poignant memories of the people that I've met through the festival, and it feels like a really, a very special place to come back to and reconnect with - the people that I've met the years before and also new people from all walks of life.

GONZALO: In my case, my name is Gonzalo Herrero. I'm an architect, curator, educator and the reason why I am here is because I'm the director for the Eco City World Summit, which is happening between the 6th and the 8th of June at the Barbican Centre in London. So the Eco City World Summit is part of the London Festival of Architecture.

There are a few events that are live in the program. A lecture with Yasmeen Lari, who had just received the RIBA Gold Medal and conversation with Norman Foster. For those that don't know much about the Eco City World Summit, it's something that is not new. It's new to the London audience, but it's been running since 1990.

Was initiated by Eco City Builders, which is a not-for-profit organisation based in California and every two years is traveling to a different city of the world. Through a conference and an exhibition and different networking opportunities and workshops, bringing an opportunity to discuss about the future of our cities and how they can be more ecological.

And the theme we've chosen for this edition of the Summit is connecting communities, which is very connected itself with the theme for the 2023 edition of the London Festival of Architecture, which is 'In common'. So we will be looking at the role that communities play on tackling climate change and shaping the future of our cities.

Yeah, I following up on what Melodie was saying about her connection to the London Festival of Architecture. I'm trying to think back and I think I've been connected to the LFA since 2013 when I moved here to London. I started working as a curator for the Architectural Foundation, and back then the LFA was organised by four different organisations, the RIBA, NLA, the Architectural Foundation British Council.

Since then in 2013, I've been involving many different roles and participated programming some events. When I was working at the Royal Academy of Arts, we were organising a symposium together. Plus the very iconic Lego architecture challenge that Rob Fiehn started. So yeah, it's been quite a few different events and opportunities and I'm very glad to now through NLA be involved again in the LFA.

ELIZA: Amazing. And I love those two introductions and it shows why it's the perfect two people to be speaking to about this year's programme and actually igniting some memories in my own mind about some of these projects, which is really lovely!

And before we dive into this year's programme, I actually wanted to take it back to theme. Melodie you're part of our Curation Panel this year. You've been very much involved in selecting the theme, which has then sort of shaped the programme. What's that process been like? And is there anything that particularly stood out to you through that period?

MELODIE: Yeah, I forgot to include that in my intro, but thank you so much for having me as a curator this year. And I mean, in a way, almost going behind the scenes with the festival and working with the team. It was great to see how much preparation you're all doing.

And I remember we came for our meeting to look at the theme - and I don't remember all of the topics now actually, but what I do remember - it was this really engaging - like we went way over our time limit, and we couldn't even finish our decision making, so it went off, everybody went off their own way and we were continuing this decision through email- and it came down to the idea that we knew, we wanted to look at a way to encourage the

organisers and the participants in the festival to create conversations to look at how, what people share. So really to make it intentional, to look at ways that we can maybe acknowledge and articulate some of the differences and the wide diversity and array of perspectives that we have within a city like London, which is so unique in the world.

But at the same time, to look for that overlap of shared interests in really surprising ways. And we even had quite a few discussions about should it be about the Commons because the commons is historically also a very important part of what makes London very special, in terms of the parks that were given back to the people. It's also become a very international city, so by adding in common, it means that it's much more easy to understand and it's much more clear and direct in the communication to the audience. So what's also been really interesting is to see how all of the different curators this year took it in their own direction and how it means something slightly different to each individual. So I'm really excited to see all the different events and what comes out of them!

ELIZA: Amazing! And obviously we launched our program last week, which is really exciting, and it's been really interesting to see the different interpretations of the theme that have come up in that first discussion that we had as a panel. But also the following interpretation that have come from all the organisers and the resulting program for this year. And I'm just wondering, as you've gone through the programme so far, are there any particular events that are standing out to you that you really want to see or attend?

GONZALO: I can jump in. Yeah, I'm always particularly interested in all the commissions and installations. When looking at the programme, there is a few of them that I found particularly interesting because they open new opportunities. I mean, I'm very interested in ecology and how this is translated, made accessible to a wide audience, not only to academics or architects. And I think there is a bunch of installation this year that are particularly relevant and I encourage everyone to go through the website clicking on installations.

Take a day or two to like travel across London to visit them. One of them is with Fleet Street Quarter in the very centre. I find it particularly interesting because it brings like a new green spot to like the very centre of the city of London, full of skyscrapers and concrete and suddenly people will end in almost like an oasis full of not only green, but medicinal plants.

It's a very good opportunity to rediscover this area and looking at the ecological potential that it can have. There is another project called Connecting Colindale, a Flight Path folly. The aim of this one is designed to improve the visibility of Barnet's green space and connecting the park where it's located to the neighbouring Montrose and Silk Stream.

So it's almost becoming an opportunity for the neighbours to take over that space. And I think, that is something that is quite beautiful about this installation and in relation to the theme for this year - In Common, and it's about the idea of belonging, the opportunity that it can bring to residents and to citizens to just explore and take ownership of those public spaces that are often run by private corporations or councils and often very neglected. So,

there is an opportunity there for the community and this installation can inspire them to take over those spaces in the future and do more than.

There is another one that I find particularly interesting on this idea of taking ownership of the public space and empowering communities and it's 'Seats at the Table', which is a scheme that create a series of temporary accessible and sustainable installations in the form of a street furniture in the Smithfield area and also in the City of London. So that is a project putting an eye on how those public spaces need to be designed to be accessible to everyone.

And when I say accessible, not just like a tagline on a press release, it's something that it's real and it happening and accessible to all audiences. And this kind of project 'Seats at the table' is tackling and addressing some of these issues.

MELODIE: And just to build off what Gonzalo was saying, I'm also really struck by the project 'Seats at the Table'. And I love the way that it's inviting people to this table. So there's this equal place where then everyone who comes, they bring with them their background and their story, and they discover through that interaction. The different, you know, they're like co-designed pieces of furniture. I'm actually super curious to even see my own reaction and how I interact with the installation.

GONZALO: Yeah, because I think often when, when things are like designed with the community and people that are not coming from a design background that create kind of a scepticism, that people are very sceptical about, like what is going to be the outcome of that?

Is it going to be actually something beautiful and like, well designed? I mean, I think this is going to be a good example for testing that. I really like in particular about the bringing the idea of the table, something that we - I'm from Spain, in case people didn't recognise my accent - and you know, in many public spaces and parks, you often find tables - tables that people can take over for doing a picnic or playing chess or doing whatever they want. Or even youngsters and teenagers like having a drink at night.

And I think the kind of domestic furniture brought to a public space can really bring these ideas of domesticity to those spaces. Making them more accessible and bringing certain flexibility in the way they are used. And again, it going back to the idea of empowering communities, that I think you can really do by very simple furniture elements. And I think this is going to be a good example to test how that work in a context like London.

MELODIE: And actually one of the topics that came up in our discussion for the theme for this year was also the idea of access. And especially one of our co-curators, which was Jordan Whitewood-Neal was explaining how important it is to make that a key focus of these events. And I was really glad to see the array of events that also approached that in their own way.

From another point of view in terms of access in the public realm and in design. We also realised that a lot of these types of industry events and festivals feel quite intimidating for everyday people. And so this year we also had an architecture student on the curatorial panel and who was very, very insightful in terms of explaining the types of events that would really be a big draw for him and someone who grew up in London and who maybe isn't so familiar about speaking about architecture.

GONZALO: Mm-hmm. Because Eliza but this was the result of competition, no, one of the many that are organised every year by the London Festival of Architecture? So it's again about democratising the whole process behind LFA, not only the well-known practices being commissioned. I mean here everything is very democratic, and everyone can apply. And something that I really encourage, particularly young architects and designers to keep an eye on because every year there are lots of calls and opportunities to be part of the LFA.

ELIZA: Yeah, you're right. And actually I think this year we have the biggest number of competitions and commissions in the festival program this year, which is really exciting. And some of the ones you've mentioned already - so there's things exploring sustainability, accessibility, but there's also an urban playground. So hopefully there's something for everyone, even within just those projects!

And what's really nice is that they have a temporary moment in the festival, but they really help shape what the city looks like long term. Whether the pieces are able to stay there - and we have a couple of pieces this year which are permanent projects - but also some of which are temporary and allow us to rethink how we use space, who it's for. So yeah, I think it's going to be really exciting to see what they'll look like. They're all in the process of being made at the moment, but I think should be some really beautiful moments and quite powerful moments I think in the festival.

GONZALO: And I really hope that some of the councils that are involved and beats and different organisations that are supporting this kind of installation see this as an opportunity to create something that it might be not that temporary and more permanent.

And also continue commissioning, because sometimes there is kind of jump when it's something temporary, you go for very emerging designers and then when it's something permanent, you go for the established ones. I think this can show how they can still keep trusting young generations for the permanent commissions, and hopefully activating in a more permanent way, which is also connected to the ecological aspect of these installations that hopefully, in many cases they will have an afterlife and they will be relocated if they survive the summer somewhere else.

MELODIE: I was going to say, and that's one of the most, when we go to these types of conferences every year that look at how do we create more pedestrian friendly cities? How do we reduce the kind of pollution coming from the cars? And it's always proven that the best way to make those changes are through these temporary tests, through prototyping it, and then the reaction, let's say even the pedestrianisation of Regents Street and all the kind

of summer days out. Those are really the big convincers to the councils and the people who are developing that property that it's really worth investing in.

ELIZA: And that's exactly one of the things that I love about the LFA competitions and commissions is that - I mean, if you just look at last year, we had a road closure in Somers Town in Camden, we had three built projects by NOOMA Studios, and then NOOMA worked really closely with the local residents to put together a programme which really celebrated the area. That now has gone on to inform the long-term plan for the area with Camden Council, which is really exciting and I'm really looking forward to seeing how that's going to progress over the next few years.

GONZALO: Yeah and I really like that many of these installation also have green at the core of the design, which is looking at the theme for this year 'In Common,' it's about what we have in common, not only with other humans, but also with non-human beings and how we need to design for both in order to create like a more ecological future.

So I think that is really good, and many of them are in collaboration. Architects in collaboration with botanists or like people that have expertise on how to develop greenery in these conditions. And I think it's that collaboration where it's very important to happen more and more - taking architecture outside the silos that have been put over the last centuries.

MELODIE: And yeah, including, like one of the picks that I made for my curator's choice was this the 'Never-ending challenge', which is restoring the large historic green spaces in the borough of Bromley. And it's a very serious endeavour that takes on board so many people's insights and knowledge. But then on the other hand, there's also a number of very playful experimental events.

Like Eliza, you were mentioning the playground or there's the library in Barnet, which is encouraging play. There's an event the Architectural Association which is focused on how do video games also provide this platform for which people can explore how our cities are being built. And I think with the curator's choice, I tried to pick an array of events that have, a lot of different types of interaction. So on the one hand there's the Augmented Reality for the Vertical Farm to Fork project at the factory. And then there's also the cycling tour, for instance, to discover Enfield's new architecture. And I think all of these different types of interaction physically and digitally are then going to be a way forward that draws many different types of people to explore similar ideas.

ELIZA: If anyone wants to check out Melodie's curator's picks. We'll pop the link into the show notes so you can have an explore of all of Melodie's picks, and the picks from the rest of our curation panel. And I'm just thinking, so you've mentioned cycle tours, events, built projects, what are you hoping that people take away from each of these projects? There are so many different types of events, so many different types of topics and explored during this year's program. What are you hoping that people will take away, or potentially a challenge that they should be thinking about?

MELODIE: I think that all, I mean, the entire festival for me embodies how important it is that the city and the way that it's designed and built is focused on the people who live and who live in the city and who create their lives and communities here. So each of those events that I've went to previously, they formed such a strong interpersonal connection with the people that I met, whether they were fellow architects and designers, or whether they were just people who loved swimming in the swimming pool or who, you know, really enjoyed the walking tour of Clerkenwell, so I think my biggest hope is to encourage everyone to go and explore something new, to go and explore a new part of the town.

Like for instance, the Arts Depot in Barnet. The only reason why I went out there one time was for an arts festival, and I think this is an instigation and kind of provocation to invite us to explore our city much more. And I think the people who are putting on the events, the organisers the people who are operating the buildings, the architects, they're all very keen to also interface with the people who are using the buildings and who audiences are.

GONZALO: Yeah, I will say, something that, I always find very helpful is sometimes you are meeting with someone, meeting with a friend or doing something else, and you can arrive like half an hour before, or like one hour before you are meeting with your friend. I mean, , check on the map - which is, I think like a read a new feature or been there for only this year or the last year - check on the map and see what is nearby, what is happening nearby, because there is a lot of small pop-up exhibitions or installations or even some talks that might be happening in the area that you are traveling to. So yeah, there is something that I totally encourage everyone to like dig into the map and check in if there is something on your itinerary that might be happening over the month of June as part of the LFA.

ELIZA: You picked up on the map, we're quite excited about this new way of navigating the program that hopefully works exactly as you mentioned, either to see what's on your doorstep or a place you've never been before, and you wanted to visit to see what is around. Because I think people often think London Festival of Architecture is just Central London. But no, we're all over. So it is really lovely way to explore the programme.

If you prefer other ways, we've got collections, which are focused around themes, or different focuses for students, for families. There are loads of different ways of navigating the program to how feels best for you, and hopefully it's a really lovely opportunity to find the event that really speaks to everyone individually.

Melodie as well, I know you've got an event that you are actually running, I don't know if you want to give a little plug for that.

MELODIE: Yeah, well, we have a couple. I mean, we're opening our studio, which is really exciting because up until now we've been renovating. So we're very happy to open the doors for our studio later on the 16th, and Clerkenwell has a lot of great studios to visit.

I think the Amin Taha Groupwork is giving a tour as well as a Vitra showroom, as well as SimpsonHaugh Architects. Anyway, so there's loads to explore on the 16th in Clerkenwell - just look for the pink stickers or flags!

And on the 21st, we also have a special event called Participatory Urbanism, which is one of our research teams presenting work that they're doing, which is looking at, again, the potential of video games to, I guess, explore and open up the complexities of designing in the built environment. So on the one hand, dense cities and having lots of buildings close together create this opportunity for people to be able to walk so you don't have to have as much vehicle emissions. But on the other hand, then it also requires more materials and more structure, which is another type of carbon footprint. But then it also simultaneously creates spaces that you can activate socially. So there's all these different layers that go into designing a city in a sustainable ecologically and social and community focused way. And this is just trying to open that up in a way that's, it's not so pixelated, let's say, like a lot of the existing games that we see out there.

And this builds on a long history of research that the team has been working on. So we're really excited because we have Epic Games involved in the conversation, as well as Squint Opera, which focuses on interaction design and it's being moderated by Siroun Button who works with Barclay Group. Developing homes with the St. Williams Homes and already we've had some initial conversations between the team and I think it's going to be very interesting the topics that they bring up the overlaps in terms of what they're trying to do and finding new mediums and technologies to do so.

GONZALO: That sounds super exciting. I can't, wait to go into the website and book that event! Yeah. I think video gaming and the work like people like Epic Games are doing in collaboration with arch architectural practices like Zaha Hadid. It's very important to develop our imagination and imagine new ways of connecting with our city to design it and to also building empathy towards other species. So yeah, very excited about that one.

MELODIE: I think also, like I understand with the festival, it's always it's always up to the minute and I know that behind the scenes all of the organisers are just racing to get it together including ourselves. And I would just encourage everyone who's going through the website if you're not sure, but it sounds kind of interesting, just give it a chance and you'll, I'm always super like pleasantly surprised by the people that I meet and the conversations that I end up engaging in.

ELIZA: I think that's a really lovely place to end this conversation on, on that note, but is there one final thing you wanted our listeners to take away from this conversation, or one plug that you'd like to make?

GONZALO: Well, I going to reinforce the messaging about everyone having a look at the LFA program, in particular about the Eco City World Summit running between the 6th and the 8th of June. And yeah, have a look. We have an incredible panel of speakers. I mentioned Norman Foster and Yasmeen Lari. But we have many others, Carlos Moreno the guy behind the 15-minute City. Lina Ghotmeh and many others, so please have a look and book your tickets. It's only three weeks away.

ELIZA: I can't believe we're already nearly in June, so yeah, that's a very good reminder everyone. We already have events which are starting to sell out really quickly. I think there's

so much enthusiasm do you get back into the city. There's so much enthusiasm, I think, for this year's program in particular. So really encourage everyone to take a look at the programme, book your favourite bits to not miss out!

And exactly as Melodie said, be curious, if there's something that piques your curiosity, then run with it and you definitely will be pleasantly surprised. And we look forward to hearing everyone's stories, post festival, and all the learnings that come out of that.

What other handles that people should follow, or the website people should go to for Eco City?

GONZALO: Well, EcoCityWorldSummit.com. That is the first one. And then they can follow the hashtag [#EcoCity2023](https://EcoCity2023). And just for the listeners, if they want to, to buy a three day ticket, they can use the Code [23ECOLON25](https://EcoCity2023) to get a 25% discount.

ELIZA: Perfect. And we'll pop that in the show notes as well for everyone. Melodie as well. What are the best handles of the practice?

MELODIE: I think maybe the best way is to follow our Instagram. We have quite a large following and we're very studious about keeping that updated. We also keep all of our press releases up on the website, so under news on our website and one day we will have our new and updated and easy to navigate website, but not for this 2023.

ELIZA: Coming soon - watch this space!

Brilliant. Well, I think that's all the time we have today, but thank you to our guests, Melodie and Gonzalo. We'll be back with two new episodes next month, hearing from the designers of some of our 2023 built projects. Until then, if you like this episode, make sure to follow the channel, check out the 2023 program by heading to the LFA website - the link will also be in the show notes - and why not share with us what event you're most looking forward to on social media with the [#LFA2023](https://LFA2023).

Until next time!